

## «CONFLICT ON THE KYRGYZ-TAJIK BORDER (2022)»

Umurbaev Rustam Shakirjanovich

*4th-year student of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies*

*Tashkent city*

*urustam316@gmail.com*

*+998946995982*

**Abstract:** *The world’s attention has been focused on the Russia-Ukraine crisis, while other conflicts, including the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dispute in Central Asia did not elicit much international media attention. The escalation of conflict between the two countries, as witnessed on September 14-15 and then again on November 3-4, 2022, has been a troubling development for the region. The conflict has the potential to cause a negative impact on the stability of Central Asia and its neighboring regions. Over 100 people were killed and scores injured in recent border conflicts between the two countries. The fighting took place near Kyrgyzstan’s southern Batken province, bordering Vorukh region of Tajikistan. Tajikistan has accused Kyrgyz forces of targeting civilian infrastructure and destroying a mosque, while the latter has alleged unilateral Tajik aggression.*

**Key words:** *Livestock, abovementioned, organisation, prerequisite, acceptable, cooperation, disagreements.*

### INTRODUCTION

The two landlocked countries share an approximately 1,000 km. long border, a large part of which is unmarked and, hence, disputed. There have been flare-ups in the past as well over sharing of water and land resources. Due to the region’s increasing strategic importance for India, - as can be seen from initiatives like the Connect Central Asia Policy, INSTC Corridor, cooperation in the field of energy and trade etc., - understanding the conflict and its impact becomes essential. The recent flare-up has been caused by a combination of a troubled historical legacy and present tussle. Almost half of the Tajik-Kyrgyz 1,000 km border is disputed. The issue of the delimitation of the border is a relic of the Soviet era, as the borders were demarcated during Stalin’s period. While regular talks have tried to resolve the issue, one of the crucial points of disagreement remains over the map which is to be used for demarcation purposes. The Soviet Union implemented various policies in Central Asia for development, such as rapid industrialisation, forced collectivisation of land, pastoral and livestock regulation, compulsory migration, and delimitation of borders of its Republics, which led to a shift in ethnic demography especially in Ferghana valley (spread across eastern Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and northern).

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

The creation of the new Republics in the region after the disintegration of USSR, caused redistribution of resources like livestock and farms. The Tajik territory saw their livestock increase, but with scarce grazing land. Hence agreements were signed between the two sides over the utilization of Kyrgyz territory by the Tajiks’ livestock. The proximity of Tajikistan’s fertile Vorukh exclave to the area of dispute only adds to the disorder. Additionally, following the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequent change of water and land agreements that were in place at the time, numerous smaller

independent farms were established, altering the amount of water available for the fields. Multiple water routes shared by both nations have ill-defined trajectories, that vary with change of seasons, therefore, regular water conflicts disrupt fair access to water on both sides. As a result, during the vital irrigation season, minor disagreements virtually always arise.

Thus, while access and control over water resources and pastoral lands are the main drivers of the conflict, abovementioned factors have combined to create a complex web of territorial claims and counterclaims once the Central Asian independent.

Neighbouring powers like China and Russia do not want instability in Central Asia, even if it involves smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are heavily indebted to China. Both also have hundreds of thousands of migrant labourers working in Russia. Yet, even with strong economic influence, neither Russia nor China can deliver on security guarantees for conflicts in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) remains the primary regional organisation for cooperation in the larger Central Asian region. On September 14, 2022, when Kyrgyz and Tajik border guards exchanged gunfire, the Presidents of the two countries were in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, to participate in the SCO Summit. On the side-lines of the Samarkand Summit on September 16, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and his Tajik counterpart, Emomali Rahmon, held a meeting. Media of both countries noted that the Presidents in the meeting discussed the border situation. The Kyrgyz statement said that the two leaders had agreed to a ceasefire, though the Tajik statement did not mention it. That same day, fighting resumed on the border.

## RESULTS

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also members of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which does not intervene in interstate conflicts among its members. Previously, when Kyrgyz and Tajik militaries clashed in April 2021, the CSTO was holding a Summit in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. The organization made no note of it. However, in response to the recent clashes, the CSTO offered diplomatic mediation between Bishkek and Dushanbe.

The European Union also issued a statement, emphasizing the «implementation of ceasefire and to spare no effort to de-escalate the tensions and reach a sustainable solution». The EU is looking to avoid more such military escalations on its Eastern flank, due to its preoccupation with the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Lastly, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called for a «dialogue for a lasting ceasefire» between the parties.

Intra-regional cooperation amongst the countries of Central Asia has been growing in recent times. There is a general agreement that economic prosperity and political stability in Central Asia is critical not only for the 77 million inhabitants of the region, but also for Central Asia’s neighbours, since Central Asia serves as a strategically important land bridge between Europe and Asia. As the five Central Asian countries are landlocked, and relatively small economies, a critical prerequisite for long-term economic growth and political stability is successful economic integration underpinned by effective regional cooperation. Thus, the escalation of tensions between the two countries is being seen as a setback to the current positive trend of regional cooperation.

The Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict has affected the local agro-pastoral households the most. Many are tired of continued conflicts and have started to move out to other regions and big cities in order to find a peaceful life. Ethnic populations that had long enjoyed access to friends and families

just across borders were now isolated and often faced visa requirements and other access difficulties. Much of the population views these new restrictions with hostility and acutely feels the disruption in traditional patterns of commerce and society. Additionally, long-standing industrial and transportation links were disrupted.

#### Discussion

Such conflicts also carry huge social costs. Kyrgyz Ministry of Education reports that 26 schools and 30 kindergartens in the Batken region (part of the larger conflict zone), were closed as nearly 137,000 people evacuated since the fighting started. Of these, ten schools and seven kindergartens were damaged in the conflict. Resolving these lingering border disputes has become critical for stability in the region. Relations in the Central Asian region have often been uneasy for a variety of reasons, ranging from ethnic and socio-political divisions to geo-economic factors. Tensions over borders have only made cooperation in other areas, such as trade, transit, and movement of people more daunting. At the same time, border disputes have also become contentious domestic political discourse. Concessions made in border negotiations can be rich fodder for political opposition, and this has served to further constrain the latitude of governments to compromise.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus, border clashes such as this have the potential to disrupt the recent trend and progress being made towards intra-regional cooperation amongst the Central Asian states, leading to disruption of normal life, loss of life and property and opportunities for outside powers to get involved, among others.

#### Acknowledgement

The resolution of territorial disputes is obviously emotional and goes directly to each country’s definition of national interests. No nation wants to make territorial concessions. Nonetheless, it is important that any territorial differences be resolved on a mutually acceptable basis in accordance with the standards of international law and practice. All the countries in the region are facing economic and social challenges. In these circumstances, tension over borders is another destabilising issue. Resolving these issues will require great persistence, compromises, continued negotiations, confidence building measures, and genuine creativity.

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